Celebrating the Rite of Marriage

By Most Reverend Ronald P. Herzog

Bishop of Alexandria

It would not be much of an exaggeration to say that most people depend very heavily on what they experience through their senses. Even more specifically, many would probably describe themselves as "visual people," emphasizing a great dependence on what sight offers them. When we add to the extraordinary impact of these visual experiences those of hearing, smell, taste, and touch, it becomes obvious that we are dependent on our senses for almost anything we encounter.

Our liturgy touches those same senses. After all, we are human; and our worship, as well as our everyday lives, is intimately bound up in the encounter of the people and things around us through our senses. How many times do we find our senses enabling us to experience the mysteries we celebrate? Works of art and architecture surround us. Music in its many forms energizes us. The scent of incense draws us into the sublime. The Word of God and the sacredness of silence capture us. These are only a sampling of the richness of our Catholic experience of worship.

When all these elements come together in worship, we call it ritual. It is this rich blend of words and actions, sights and fragrances that allows us to experience God's saving action. We do so through our humanness, the same humanness that Jesus fully embraced in the Incarnation. We find it manifest in many unique ways in the celebration of the Eucharist and in the other sacraments. Each builds on some human insight and experience to convey its meaning and enable its transforming action.

There is, however, a danger to ritualized worship. It can become an end in itself rather than a means to a greater good. It can become mechanical and merely external rather than a deep expression of faith. As a result, rites can become routine and carried out in a way that negates their true meaning. Sacred Liturgy can become only repeated words and gestures, devoid of any transforming potential.

The focus of this year's Catechetical Sunday is the Sacrament of Matrimony. With the general observations mentioned above, let us examine them as they find a concrete expression in the rite that enables a man and woman to truly commit themselves to each other in lifelong fidelity as disciples of the Lord. This sacrament, perhaps to a greater

degree than other sacramental celebrations, expresses the richness of different cultures. It would be impossible to even begin to discuss the ways this diversity is expressed, so these reflections will be limited to what is found in our present English Rite of Marriage.

Preparing for the Sacrament of Matrimony

Even though the celebration of marriage ordinarily takes place in a church setting, either within the context of the Nuptial Mass or as a rite by itself, it is often a sacrament that involves couples with limited understanding of the rite or even of their Catholic faith. This possibility presents both an opportunity and a challenge to whoever is assisting in the marriage preparation process. All too often, those approaching the Church for this solemnization of their bond to each other are influenced far more by secular society and customs than by the deep spiritual meaning of this sacrament. Having spent more than thirty-five years in parish ministry, I can confirm from firsthand experience that even faithful Catholics often lack any real appreciation of many of the issues at stake. It is also somewhat idealistic for the pastor to expect to change that during the limited time he has available to help individual couples. It is often stated that we now have more than a generation of Catholics who have had little or no significant formation in their faith. The presumptions that would have been valid in the past are now open to question. Those approaching marriage often have not had a strong home faith environment to nurture them; hence, their understanding of marriage may be very limited, even nonexistent.

In spite of this, it is important to do whatever is possible to allow the rite itself to influence the faith of those who take part. As anyone who has worked in this area of ministry knows well, it can take a gifted diplomat to steer the process away from a society event into a true experience of God's presence as the couple makes this commitment publicly in the presence of the faith community. This task is further complicated if one of the parties is not Catholic, or if family members and friends who will be present come from different faith traditions. If it is difficult for those raised in the Catholic faith to understand the rich symbolism of the marriage rite, it is certainly no surprise to find even less understanding and appreciation in others.

Again, based on my parish experience, it is not uncommon for an engaged couple and their parents to be far more concerned with the attire, decorations, music, and reception than in the active planning of the liturgical celebration. It is difficult at times to convince them that they need to be involved even in selecting the Scripture readings.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* provides a sound starting point to explore the marriage covenant and the rite that enacts it.[1] Paragraph 1601

1 See *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC), 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: Libreria Editrice Vaticana–United States Conference of Catholic Bishops [USCCB], 2000).

quotes directly from the *Code of Canon Law* (c. 1055 §1): "The matrimonial covenant, by which a man and a woman establish between themselves a partnership of the whole of life, is by its nature ordered toward the good of the spouses and the procreation and education of offspring; this covenant between baptized persons has been raised by Christ the Lord to the dignity of a sacrament." Paragraph 1621 of the *Catechism* provides the framework for the celebration:

In the Latin Rite the celebration of marriage between two Catholic faithful normally takes place during Holy Mass, because of the connection of all the sacraments with the Paschal mystery of Christ. In the Eucharist the memorial of the New Covenant is realized, the New Covenant in which Christ has united himself for ever to the Church, his beloved bride for whom he gave himself up. It is therefore fitting that the spouses should seal their consent to give themselves to each other through the offering of their own lives by uniting it to the offering of Christ for his Church made present in the Eucharistic sacrifice, and by receiving the Eucharist so that, communicating in the same Body and the same Blood of Christ, they may form but "one body" in Christ.

Understanding the Rite of Marriage

With the teachings of the *Catechism* in the background, it is now possible to explore the many aspects of the Rite of Marriage, including its texts and symbols. The celebration of marriage, as with all the sacraments of the Church, envisions the active participation of the assembly. This is often not considered in the wedding planning. Those who are present, usually by invitation, are relegated to a spectator role. Accomplishing their active participation requires both careful planning and a new insight. Although the couple is a focal point, the bride and groom are not the sum and substance of the rite. It is a rite of the Church, as the citations from the *Catechism* emphasize. This is most especially true when the marriage is celebrated during Mass.

The Entrance Rite

The Entrance Rite offers several possibilities for exploring the texts and symbols of the Rite of Marriage. The Rite suggests that the priest and the ministers welcome the bride and groom "in a friendly manner" at the door of the Church (no. 19).[2] The option of welcoming the couple at the altar is also possible. If the welcoming is omitted, the Mass begins as usual.

What is very significant is that the directions (no. 20) state, "If there is a procession to the altar, the ministers go first, followed by the priest, and then the bride and bridegroom. According to local custom, they may be escorted by at least their parents and the two witnesses. Meanwhile, the entrance song is sung." I suspect that very few marriage ceremonies actually follow this procedure. It seems fairly clear that the Church

2 *Rite of Marriage*, in *The Rites of the Catholic Church*, vol. 1 (New York: Pueblo Publishing Company, 1990), no. 19. All subsequent quotes from the *Rite of Marriage* come from this edition.

does not foresee the common practice of a procession of the bride with her bridesmaids. In many instances, the groom is almost an afterthought, and rarely does the beautiful symbolism of the couple being escorted by their parents find a place.

The final sentence is short but significant for the participation of the assembly. The very nature of an entrance song is that it is sung by the entire assembly. The typical triumphant processional music accompanying the bridal procession misses the point. The choice of an entrance song that can be sung by the usually diverse gathering can present a true challenge. However, if the Entrance Rite is carried out as the Church desires, the effect can be both dramatic and meaningful. Those who have gathered are instantly a part of the sacred action, not just observers.

The Liturgy of the Word

The Liturgy of the Word is celebrated according to the rubrics. A homily is given. The challenge for those who assist in the planning is to take the needed time to study the many possible Scripture selections available for this celebration in order to choose wisely the ones that the couple believes expresses their insight into their own unique commitment. I wonder how many priests have heard couples say, "Father, just use whatever you want."

The Rite of Marriage

The Rite of Marriage proper takes place after the Liturgy of the Word, obviously using the message of Sacred Scripture as a foundation on which the commitment is built. The opening instruction may be surprising to many: "All stand, including the bride and groom, and the priest addresses them in these or similar words" (no. 23). The entire assembly's action of standing again removes the assembly from a mere spectator role. They are to serve as witnesses of this union. The first sentence spoken by the priest in the rite's introduction makes this very clear: "My dear friends, you have come together in this church so that the Lord may seal and strengthen your love in the presence of the Church's minister and this community" (no. 23). The introduction then links this sacramental experience to Baptism as the first experience of their sacramental life. This brief introduction concludes with an invitation: "And so, in the presence of the Church, I ask you to state your intentions" (no. 23). As often happens in our liturgy, important theological points are subtly woven into the ceremony. The mention of "Church" obviously includes those actually present, but it is also a reminder that the saving actions of the Lord Jesus in the sacraments also have a universal dimension. He, as head of the body of believers, is always joined to all the members.

Even though the formal documentation needed in preparation for marriage has already been completed, the priest asks the couple in this public setting of the rite to state their intentions in the presence of all the assembled witnesses. The first question addresses the necessary freedom without reservation absolutely essential to marriage. Next, they are asked if they will love and

honor each other as spouses for life. And finally, unless the couple is advanced in years, both are asked about their willingness to accept children in a loving environment in fidelity to the law of Christ and his Church. Without doubt these are serious and solemn questions. They should be neither asked nor answered casually.

Acknowledging the affirmative response given by bride and groom to these questions, the priest invites them to declare their consent "before God and his Church" (no. 25). For a short period of time years ago, the rite included an option for couples to write their own marriage vows. However, this option is no longer permitted, because it often happened that the words composed by the couple, while perhaps beautiful and even poetic, did not clearly state the needed content. The present rite offers two sets of texts that may be used, and each set includes one version that relies on an older form of the ceremony. The first set of texts offers an opportunity for the couple to actually state their vows; the other set allows their consent to be made as a response to questions asked by the priest. Although responding with a simple "I do" may seem easier for the couple, there is great power in hearing them state the words themselves. There are many ways that this can be accomplished without unnecessary anxiety.

With the exchange of consent clearly made, the priest once again asks that the Lord will strengthen the couple in their covenant of marriage and bring them blessings. The prayer concludes with a simple yet profound statement: "What God has joined, men must not divide" (no. 26). Once again the Church reminds us of the sacredness and binding quality of marriage.

Perhaps the most significant symbolic action in the entire ceremony is the blessing of the rings and the placing of a ring on the finger of the spouse. The blessing has several forms, each stressing a slightly different aspect of the symbolism, but the words spoken by the newly married couple reaffirm the visual gesture. Each spouse addresses the other by name and then adds, "Take this ring as a sign of my love and fidelity," followed by the Sign of the Cross.

Other Elements of the Nuptial Mass

With the blessing and exchange of rings, the Rite of Marriage is completed. It is worth noting that there is no provision in the rite for any use of a unity candle, even though its use has become rather commonplace. The Mass proceeds in the usual way. After the General Intercessions, the directions suggest that the bride and groom bring up the gifts of bread and wine. Other members of the family may be considered for this role as well, but the symbolism of the newly married couple serving as the bearers of gifts links the ceremony just witnessed to the mission of mirroring the love of Christ for the Church, as St. Paul so beautifully teaches.

One additional element is added to the Mass: the Nuptial Blessing. It immediately follows the Lord's Prayer, and the next prayer ("Deliver us . . .") is omitted. Several texts are given for this prayer, each highlighting some

aspect of married life. This prayer of blessing enunciates in practical language the gift and calling of marriage, asking God to be present in the lives of the newly married couple so that they can be effective signs of the eternal plan of love.

At the conclusion of the Mass, the ritual provides four different forms of the Solemn Blessing. The fourth one is proper to the United States and is more expansive in its wording and imagery than the other three. The rite ends simply with the ministers leaving the sanctuary.

Conclusion

When we examine the Rite of Marriage, it is interesting to note that the ceremony itself is profound in its simplicity. The straightforward words and modest gestures speak their meaning eloquently, if celebrated well. If the celebration has truly been one in which the entire gathered community has taken active part, it is very possible that it has had a transforming effect not only on the newly married couple and their families, but on all who witnessed this solemnity.

Copyright © 2010, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Washington, D.C. All rights reserved. Permission is hereby granted to duplicate this work without adaptation for non-commercial use.

Excerpts from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, second edition, copyright © 2000, Libreria Editrice Vaticana–United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Washington, D.C. Used with permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture texts used in this work are taken from the *New American Bible,* copyright © 1991, 1986, and 1970 by the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Washington, DC 20017 and are used by permission of the copyright owner. All rights reserved.

Excerpts from the *Rite of Marriage* copyright © 1969, International Committee on English in the Liturgy. Used with permission. All rights reserved.

Quotations from *Code of Canon Law: Latin-English Edition: New English Translation* (*Codex Iuris Canonici* [CIC]) copyright © 1998, Canon Law Society of America, Washington, DC. Used with permission. All rights reserved.